

Choosing a Preschool

By Janelle Durham, Parent Educator, Bellevue College <http://bellevuetoddlers.wordpress.com/>

Does your child need to go to preschool?

If you're excited about preschool and feel your child is ready to go, skip this section and move on....

But... if you're not ready to send your child off, or don't feel that your child is ready, it may reassure you to know that preschool is optional. Preschool doesn't offer some special magic that you can't create at home.

Studies show that for children from impoverished backgrounds, whose parents have limited education, there is a clear benefit to preschool in terms of basic skill development. (See: <http://tinyurl.com/bez9qra>.) But, middle class children of educated parents typically receive in their home the stimulation and guidance they need to be ready for kindergarten. Parents can ensure this readiness by paying attention to the essential skills listed in the next section. Most of these skills can easily be learned from family members at home or from free community activities such as library story times, playing at the local park, and regular playdates with other children.

Note: If you have a younger toddler, and you know you don't want preschool for the coming fall, but you will be looking for the year after that, you might find it helpful to start this year with a preschool fair to get a sense of what's out there, and maybe visit a few open houses while there's no pressure at all to make any decisions.

Essential kindergarten readiness skills

Here are things we hope that every child is working on during the preschool years (age 3 – 5), whether in preschool or at home, to lay the foundation for success in the early years of school.

- Independence: Children learn to toilet, dress themselves, feed themselves, and clean up their toys
- Patience and Self-Regulation: Children learn to wait, take turns, share, stand in line, not interrupt, etc. They begin learning how to control their temper and in how to separate from parents
- Social Skills – Making Friends and Conflict Resolution. Best practiced in unstructured playtime
- Group Participation: Children learn to sit quietly for 10 – 15 minutes at a time, learn to pay attention to someone else speaking or reading a story, and learn to join in group activities like songs
- Basic Academic Ideas. Examples: the alphabet, how to count to 20, names of colors and shapes, how to answer simple questions and follow basic directions, how to hold a pencil and use scissors

Step 1 in Choosing a Preschool – Think about your concrete needs / basic logistics

Before you start looking at options, think about your “must haves” for preschool. Start with these, because otherwise you might fall in love with a program and *then* discover that you can't make the logistics work.

- Location: How far are you willing to drive two to three days a week? How far is your child willing to be driven? What will you be doing while your child is at preschool, and would it be convenient to get back and forth to there in the time your child is at class? Is location convenient for other family members?
- Child care or enrichment:
 - Do you need your child to be cared for several hours a week while you work? If so, you may really be looking for child care. Some child cares offer a preschool component, but if your child

is there for 6 hours a day, 5 days a week, you don't *want* all structured time. Children this age need a mix of structure and free play and down time over the course of a long day.

- If you are primarily a stay at home parent, you may only need a few hours of child-free time a week, and may just be looking for a very part-time preschool for enrichment.
- Note: sometimes names are misleading. Some things called "preschool" do not offer learning experiences. They may be a day care that knows parents pay more for the name preschool.
- Schedule: What do you need/ want?
 - How many days a week? Do you have specific days of the week you can or can't do?
 - Number of hours per day? Extended care? What time is the earliest you could be there?
 - Drop off or stay? Do you want a drop-off so you have some child-free hours? Or a co-op where some days you stay with your child? Or do you want only parent-child programs?
- Cost: What's manageable for your family?
- Potty training requirements: If you're looking for a preschool that starts several months away, it can be hard to predict what your child's needs will be. If you're worried, choose one that doesn't require it.
- Parent Involvement: Do you want to volunteer in the classroom? Would you want to visit your child during the school day? Do you want communication from the school about your child's day?

Step 2 – What are your goals for enrolling your child in a preschool?

Before you start asking for recommendations or before you start looking at schools just because someone else said it was great, spend some time thinking about your goals. What do you hope your child will get out of preschool? Look at the list of essential skills above: where do you think your child most needs to grow? What are the things you feel least confident providing at home? What do you think will engage your child the most?

In evaluating your goals, don't just think about what you want *your child* to get out of it. What do *you* want to get out of it? Do you want to meet other parents? Choose a co-op. Want to learn more about parenting? Choose a program with a parent ed component. Want a few hours a week when you're not responsible for your child just so you can relax? Choose a drop-off program that has activities you enjoy nearby.

Step 3 – Learn about your options

Get familiar with available options: look at parenting magazines or newspapers or the yellow pages. Do web searches. Find an accredited program: www.naeyc.org/academy/accreditation/search. Search for local child care and preschools, go to www.childcarenet.org/families. Go to preschool fairs.

Ask your friends, families, co-workers and other parents at the playground for recommendations. If they say they LOVE their preschool, ask why! It could be that something they love would totally turn you off.

Once you've got a list of options, do more research. Read the schools' websites in detail. Call to ask specific questions. Go to open houses. Note: most open houses are in January and February, so start looking early!

When you've narrowed your list to 3 – 4 choices, go visit! They may have an open house (which may or may not allow you to bring your child along). They may have adult-only visits where you can go and observe part of a class. They might have child visits, where your child can spend some time participating in the activities. The in-person visit is the most important part of the process! Sometimes you have a school that sounded great on paper, but when you get there, it just doesn't feel right... see below for more on that.

Step 4 - Questions to Research

What do they teach?

- They should work on all the “essential skills” areas listed above. If they don’t, you may need to think about how you’ll work on that skill at home or elsewhere.
- You should see activities that help children build: large motor skills (playground, balls, dance), small motor skills (puzzles, craft supplies), critical thinking skills (sorting games, pattern making), life skills (putting on their shoes, hanging a coat in a cubby), social skills (unstructured playtime with others), music, art, literacy (books, story time), math skills, pretend play (dress-up corner, dolls, kitchen).
- Some schools also have a specialty focus: nature-based, language immersion, arts, academic, religion.
- What is the daily schedule – how is time divided between the subjects taught? Play time? Quiet time? Outdoors? Snack? Children have short attention spans for structured activity, so it’s best in short doses, and they need plenty of unstructured time in between to explore and discover.

How do they teach it?

When you start looking at preschools, you discover a whole world of jargon you never knew: play-based, emergent, teacher led, benchmarks, coop, Reggio Emilia, and so on. It can be overwhelming. And to make it more confusing, two schools that call themselves “child-led” may look very different in practice. And the name Montessori doesn’t tell you much, as any school can call themselves that, no matter their teaching methods.

A couple big picture ideas: A *teacher-led curriculum* means the teacher always prepares the lessons in advance (and may use a standardized curriculum) and sticks to them. A *child-led curriculum* (a.k.a. emergent or constructivist) follows the children’s interests. So, for example, the teacher may know the math concept of the week is more than/less than. But instead of teaching that in a formal scheduled way, she follows the children around – asking the children playing with trains whether there are more blue trains or red trains, then asking the children playing with blocks which tower has more blocks in it, and so on.

A *structured* preschool might use group time, worksheets, and individual projects to teach particular skills. Students may be drilled in the basics, or asked to practice things over and over. (Think of your elementary school education – these are similar methods moved down to a younger group). A *play-based* preschool typically has multiple stations set up and allows children to move between things when they choose. The teacher moves around the room, making suggestions and observations to further the learning. A good play-based preschool is not just a free-play, no guidance, free-for-all. Instead, although the children may view it as just playtime, the teacher is making very conscious efforts to expand their knowledge and skills as they play. Learn more: www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article_view.aspx?ArticleID=453. Here is research about play-based learning: www.easternct.edu/cece/documents/TheCaseforPlayinPreschool.pdf

For an overview of “methods” see www.pbs.org/parents/education/going-to-school/choosing/comparing-preschool-philosophies-montessori-waldorf-and-more/. Remember actual practice may differ from theory.

Who are the students?

- How many students? The number of kids matters as much as student to teacher ratio. A 12 student school with 2 teachers (6:1 ratio) feels very different from a 24 student school with 4 teachers (6:1).

- What is the age range of the class? Some parents prefer that all the kids be as close as possible in age, but many schools tout the benefits of multi-age classrooms. The oldest kids have a chance to lead and mentor, and the younger ones benefit by the presence of an older role model.
- What are the cut-off dates for age? Some require a child to be three August 31 (like the school system's cutoff). But others may have different dates. You may choose one where your child is right in the middle of the age range rather than youngest or oldest.
- Diversity? Are all the kids like your kid? Or different? Which do you prefer?
- Neighborhood: Do the kids in the program live near you (this allows for easy playdates outside of class, and maybe carpooling options)? If you commute to a school, it can be harder to arrange playdates.
- Families: If you're doing drop-off, the families may not matter as much to you, but if you're looking at a coop program you may ask more and observe more about what kinds of parents participate.

Who are the teachers?

- Student/teacher ratio. For three year olds, NAEYC recommends a maximum group size of 18, with a student/teacher ratio between 6:1 and 9:1. In general, the smaller the better for individual attention.
- Training. Do the teachers have degrees in early childhood education? Do they attend continuing education opportunities? Do they read books about child development in their off hours?
- Teachers should have CPR and first aid training. There should be emergency plans for the facility.
- Longevity / turnover. As a general rule, the longer the teachers have been there the better. That ensures an experienced teacher, consistent caregiving, and (usually) a teacher who enjoys their work.
- Do they enjoy kids? Do they sit on the floor with the kids, smile, and engage with them? Or are they standing on the edges talking to other adults, occasionally calling out instructions to a child?

How do they handle discipline? What are their rules and how do they reinforce them? How do they deal with inevitable conflict between kids? Is their discipline style similar to yours?

What is the learning environment like?

- Clean and Safe: Is the environment clean? Safe? Well-lit and ventilated? Are there procedures for cleaning? Policies for sick children? Fire extinguishers? First aid kits? Appropriate child proofing?
- Materials: Is there a wide range of toys and supplies? Look for things which build large motor skills, small motor, imagination, literacy, number skills, social play. Are toys in good condition (don't have to be brand new)? You want to see "enough" toys, but not so many that it's cluttered and chaotic.
- Outdoors space: Do they have a place to play outdoors? How often do they use it?
- Look at the art on the walls: If it's all the same, that tells you a teacher very actively guides the process. If there's a wide range of art, it shows kids are given more creative range.
- Look for worksheets. I once visited a school that talked about how all children proceeded at their own pace, but then I saw a stack of workbooks and skimmed through. Every child was on the same page.
- Look at the books on the shelves: non-fiction? Fiction? Well-used?
- Vibe: The most important thing you're "looking" for is something you can't see. How does it *feel*? Is it warm, nurturing, full of exciting learning experiences, and full of happy children and teachers? Or is it cold, institutional, uninvolved? We know from the science of brain development that children learn best when they are happy, so look for a place where they will be happy and engaged. Look for a place where you would feel great every time you drop them off to spend time there.